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WHO BURNED COLUMBIA?

THE story goes that when General Sherman lived in New York City, which was during the last five years of his life, one night at a dinner-party when he and an ex-Confederate general who had fought against him in the southwest were the chief guests, an Englishman present, not actuated by malice but blundering through ignorance, asked innocently who burned Columbia? Had bombshells struck the tents of these generals during the war, they would not have caused half the sensation to them that did this question put with the laudable desire of information. The emphatic language of Sherman interlarded with the oaths he uttered spontaneously, the bitter charges of the Confederate, the pounding of the table, the dancing of the glasses, told the Englishman that the bloody chasm had not been entirely filled. With a little variation and with some figurative meaning, he might have used the words of Iago: "Friends all but now, even now in peace; and then but now as if some planet had outwitted men, tilting at one another's breast in opposition. I cannot speak any beginning to this peevish odds."

But the question which disturbed the New York dinner-party is a delight to the historian. Nothing can equal the pleasure he has in going through the mass of evidence, feeling that history is the best known where there are the most documents, and if he be of Northern birth he ought to approach the subject with absolute candor. Of a Southerner who had himself lost property or whose parents had lost property through Sherman's campaign of invasion, it would be asking too much to expect him to consider this subject in a judicial spirit. Even Trent, a moderate and impartial Southern writer whose tone is a lesson to us all, writes "of the much vexed question Who burned Columbia?": "It is hard to read Simms's stirring pages without coming to the conclusion that the sack of Columbia is one of the greatest crimes ever perpetrated by the troops of a civilized country."

Sherman, with his army of 60,000, left Savannah February 1, 1865, and reached the neighborhood of Columbia February 16. The next day Columbia was evacuated by the Confederates, occupied by troops of the fifteenth corps of the Federal army, and by

the morning of the 18th either three-fifths or two-thirds of the town lay in ashes. The facts contained in these two sentences are almost the only ones undisputed. We shall consider this episode most curiously if we take first Sherman's account, then Wade Hampton's, ending with what I conceive to be a true relation.

The city was surrendered by the mayor and three aldermen to Colonel George A. Stone at the head of his brigade. Soon afterwards Sherman and Howard, the commander of the right wing of the army, rode into the city; they observed piles of cotton burning and Union soldiers and citizens working to extinguish the fire, which was partially subdued. Let Sherman speak for himself in the first account that he wrote, which was his report of April 4, 1865. "Before one single public building had been fired by order," Sherman wrote, "the smouldering fires [cotton] set by Hampton's order were rekindled by the wind, and communicated to the buildings around. [Wade Hampton commanded the Confederate cavalry.] About dark they began to spread, and got beyond the control of the brigade on duty within the city. The whole of Woods' division was brought in, but it was found impossible to check the flames, which, by midnight, had become unmanageable, and raged until about 4 A. M., when the wind subsiding they were got under control.

"I was up nearly all night, and saw Generals Howard, Logan, Woods, and others, laboring to save houses and protect families thus suddenly deprived of shelter, and even of bedding and wearing apparel. I disclaim on the part of my army any agency in this fire, but, on the contrary, claim that we saved what of Columbia remains unconsumed. And without hesitation I charge General Wade Hampton with having burned his own city of Columbia, not with a malicious intent or as the manifestation of a silly 'Roman stoicism,' but from folly, and want of sense, in filling it with lint, cotton, and tinder. Our officers and men on duty worked well to extinguish the flames; but others not on duty, including the officers who had long been imprisoned there rescued by us, may have assisted in spreading the fire after it had once begun, and may have indulged in unconcealed joy to see the ruin of the capital of South Carolina." Howard, in his report, with some modification agrees with his chief, and the account in *The March to the Sea* of General Cox, whose experience and training fitted him well to weigh the evidence, gives at least a partial confirmation to Sherman's theory of the origin of the fire.

I have not, however, discovered sufficient evidence to support the assertion of Sherman that Wade Hampton ordered the cotton

in the streets of Columbia to be burned. Nor do I believe Sherman knew a single fact on which he might base so positive a statement.¹ It had generally been the custom for the Confederates in their retreat to burn cotton to prevent its falling into the hands of the invading army, and because such was the general rule Sherman assumed that it had been applied in this particular case. This assumption suited his interest, as he sought a victim to whom he might charge the burning of Columbia. His statement in his *Memoirs*, published in 1875, is a delicious bit of historical naïveté. "In my official report of this conflagration," he wrote, "I distinctly charged it to General Wade Hampton, and confess I did so pointedly, to shake the faith of his people in him, for he was in my opinion boastful and professed to be the special champion of South Carolina."

Instead of Hampton giving an order to burn the cotton, I am satisfied that he urged Beauregard, the general in command, to issue an order that this cotton should not be burned, lest the fire might spread to the shops and houses, which for the most part were built of wood, and I am further satisfied that such an order was given. Unfortunately the evidence for this is not contemporary. No such order is printed in the *Official Records*, and I am advised from the War Department that no such order has been found. The nearest evidence to the time which I have discovered is a letter of Wade Hampton of April 21, 1866, and one of Beauregard of May 2, 1866. Since these dates, there is an abundance of evidence, some of it sworn testimony, and while it is mixed up with inaccurate statements on another point, and all of it is of the nature of recollections, I cannot resist the conclusion that Beauregard and Hampton gave such an order. It was unquestionably the wise thing to do. There was absolutely no object in burning the cotton, as the Federal troops could not carry it with them and could not ship it to any seaport which was under Union control.

An order of Beauregard issued two days after the burning of Columbia and printed in the *Official Records* shows that the policy of burning cotton to keep it out of the hands of Sherman's army had been abandoned. Sherman's charge, then, that Wade Hampton burned Columbia, falls to the ground. The other part of his account, in which he maintained that the fire spread to the buildings from the smouldering cotton rekindled by the wind, which blew a gale, deserves more respect. His report saying that he saw cotton

¹ In a letter presented to the Senate of the United States (some while before April 21, 1866) Sherman said: "I saw in your Columbia newspaper the printed order of Gen. Wade Hampton that on the approach of the Yankee army all the cotton should be burned." (*South. Hist. Soc. Papers*, Vol. VII., p. 156.)

afire in the streets was written April 4, 1865, and Howard's in which the same fact is stated was written April 1, very soon after the event, when their recollection would be fresh. All of the Southern evidence (except one most important of all) is to the effect that no cotton was burning until after the Federal troops entered the city. Many Southerners in their testimony before the British and American mixed commission under examination and cross-examination swear to this; and Wade Hampton swears that he was one of the last Confederates to leave the city, and that, when he left, no cotton was afire, and he knew that it was not fired by his men. But this testimony was taken in 1872 and 1873, and may be balanced by the sworn testimony of Sherman, Howard, and other Union officers before the same commission in 1872.

The weight of the evidence already referred to would seem to me to show that cotton was afire when the Federal troops entered Columbia, but a contemporary statement of a Confederate officer puts it beyond doubt. Major Chambliss, who was endeavoring to secure the means of transportation for the Confederate ordnance and ordnance stores, wrote, in a letter of February 20, that at three o'clock on the morning of February 17, which was a number of hours before the Union soldiers entered Columbia, "the city was illuminated with burning cotton." But it does not nevertheless follow that the burning cotton in the streets of Columbia was the cause of the fire which destroyed the city. When we come to the true relation, we shall see that the preponderance of the evidence points to another cause.

February 27, ten days after the fire, Wade Hampton, in a letter to Sherman, charged him with having permitted the burning of Columbia if he did not order it directly; and this has been iterated later by many Southern writers. The correspondence between Halleck and Sherman is cited to show premeditation on the part of the general. "Should you capture Charleston," wrote Halleck, December 18, 1864, "I hope that by some accident the place may be destroyed, and if a little salt should be sown upon the site it may prevent the growth of future crops of nullification and secession." Sherman thus replied six days later: "I will bear in mind your hint as to Charleston, and don't think salt will be necessary. When I move, the Fifteenth Corps will be on the right of the Right Wing, and their position will bring them naturally into Charleston first; and if you have watched the history of that corps you will have remarked that they generally do their work up pretty well. The truth is, the whole army is burning with an insatiable desire to wreak vengeance on South Carolina. I almost tremble

at her fate, but feel that she deserves all that seems in store for her.
· · · I look upon Columbia as quite as bad as Charleston."

The evidence from many points of view corroborating this statement of the feeling of the army towards South Carolina is ample. The rank and file of Sherman's army were men of some education and intelligence; they were accustomed to discuss public matters, weigh reasons, and draw conclusions. They thought that South Carolina had brought on the civil war, was responsible for the cost and bloodshed of it, and no punishment for her could be too severe. That was likewise the sentiment of the officers. A characteristic expression of the feeling may be found in a home letter of Colonel Charles F. Morse, of the second Massachusetts, who speaks of the "miserable, rebellious State of South Carolina." "Pity for these inhabitants," he further writes, "I have none. In the first place, they are rebels, and I am almost prepared to agree with Sherman that a rebel has no rights, not even the right to live except by our permission."

It is no wonder, then, that Southern writers, smarting at the loss caused by Sherman's campaign of invasion, should believe that Sherman connived at the destruction of Columbia. But they are wrong in that belief. The general's actions were not so bad as his words. Before his troops made their entrance he issued this order: "General Howard will . . . occupy Columbia, destroy the public buildings, railroad property, manufacturing and machine shops, but will spare libraries and asylums and private dwellings." That Sherman was entirely sincere when he gave this order, and that his general officers endeavored to carry it out cannot be questioned. A statement which he made under oath in 1872 indicates that he did not connive at the destruction of Columbia. "If I had made up my mind to burn Columbia," he declared, "I would have burnt it with no more feeling than I would a common prairie dog village; but I did not do it."

Other words of his exhibit without disguise his feelings in regard to the occurrence which the South has regarded as a piece of wanton mischief. "The ulterior and strategic advantages of the occupation of Columbia are seen now clearly by the result," said Sherman under oath. "The burning of the private dwellings, though never designed by me, was a trifling matter compared with the manifold results that soon followed. Though I never ordered it and never wished it, I have never shed many tears over the event, because I believe it hastened what we all fought for, the end of the war." It is true that he feared previous to their entry the burning of Columbia by his soldiers, owing to their "deep-seated feeling of

hostility" to the town, but no general of such an army during such a campaign of invasion would have refused them the permission to occupy the capital city of South Carolina. "I could have had them stay in the ranks," he declared, "but I would not have done it under the circumstances to save Columbia."

Historical and legal canons for weighing evidence are not the same. It is a satisfaction, however, when after the investigation of any case they lead to the same decision. The members of the British and American mixed commission (an Englishman, an American and the Italian Minister at Washington), having to adjudicate upon claims for "property alleged to have been destroyed by the burning of Columbia, on the allegation that that city was wantonly fired by the army of General Sherman, either under his orders or with his consent and permission," disallowed all the claims, "all the commissioners agreeing." While they were not called upon to deliver a formal opinion in the case, the American agent was advised "that the commissioners were unanimous in the conclusion that the conflagration which destroyed Columbia was not to be ascribed to either the intention or default of either the Federal or Confederate officers."

Recapitulating then what I think I have established : Sherman's account and that of the Union writers who follow him cannot be accepted as history. Neither is the version of Wade Hampton and the Southern writers worthy of credence. Let me now give the true relation. My authorities are the contemporary accounts of six Federal officers, whose names will appear when the evidence is presented in detail ; the report of Major Chambliss of the Confederate army ; "The Sack and Destruction of Columbia," a series of articles in the *Columbia Phoenix*, written by William Gilmore Simms and printed a little over a month after the event ; and a letter written from Charlotte, February 22, to the *Richmond Whig*, by F. G. de F., who remained in Columbia until the day before the entrance of the Union troops.

Two days before the entrance of the Federal troops, Columbia was placed under martial law, but this did not prevent some riotous conduct after night and a number of highway robberies ; stores were also broken into and robbed. There were disorder and confusion in the preparations of the inhabitants for flight ; it was a frantic attempt to get themselves and their portable belongings away before the enemy should enter the city. "A party of Wheeler's Cavalry," wrote this correspondent of the *Richmond Whig*, "accompanied by their officers dashed into town [February 16], tied their horses, and as systematically as if they had been bred to the busi-

ness, proceeded to break into the stores along Main Street and rob them of their contents." Early in the morning of the 17th, the South Carolina railroad depot took fire through the reckless operations of a band of greedy plunderers, who while engaged in robbing "the stores of merchants and planters, trunks of treasure, wares and goods of fugitives," sent there awaiting shipment, fired, by the careless use of their lights, a train leading to a number of kegs of powder; the explosion which followed killed many of the thieves and set fire to the building. Major Chambliss, who was endeavoring to secure the means of transportation for the Confederate ordnance and ordnance stores, wrote: "The straggling cavalry and rabble were stripping the warehouses and railroad depots. The city was in the wildest terror."

When the Union soldiers of Colonel Stone's brigade entered the city, they were at once supplied by citizens and negroes with large quantities of intoxicating liquor, brought to them in cups, bottles, demijohns, and buckets. Many had been without supper, and all of them without sleep, the night before, and none had eaten breakfast that morning. They were soon drunk, excited, and unmanageable. The stragglers and "bummers," who had increased during the march through South Carolina, were now attracted by the opportunity for plunder and swelled the crowd. Union prisoners of war had escaped from their places of confinement in the city and suburbs, and joining their comrades were eager to avenge their real or fancied injuries. Convicts in the jail had in some manner been released. The pillage of shops and houses and the robbing of men in the streets began soon after the entrance of the army. The officers tried to preserve discipline. Colonel Stone ordered all the liquor to be destroyed, and furnished guards for the private property of citizens and for the public buildings; but the extent of the disorder and plundering during the day was probably not appreciated by Sherman and those high in command. Stone was hampered in his efforts to preserve order by the smallness of his force for patrol duty and by the drunkenness of his men. In fact, the condition of his men was such that at eight o'clock in the evening they were relieved from provost duty, and a brigade of the same division, who had been encamped outside of the city during the day, took their place. But the mob of convicts, escaped Union prisoners, stragglers and "bummers," drunken soldiers and negroes, Union soldiers who were ardent in their desire to take vengeance on South Carolina, could not be controlled. The sack of the city went on, and when darkness came the torch was applied to many houses; the high wind carried the flames from building to building, until the best

part of Columbia—a city of eight thousand inhabitants—was destroyed.

Colonel Stone wrote, two days afterwards: "About 8 o'clock the city was fired in a number of places by some of our escaped prisoners and citizens." "I am satisfied," said General W. B. Woods, commander of the brigade that relieved Stone, in his report of March 26, "by statements made to me by respectable citizens of the town, that the fire was first set by the negro inhabitants." General C. R. Woods, commander of the first division, fifteenth corps, wrote, February 21: "The town was fired in several different places by the villains that had that day been improperly freed from their confinement in the town prison. The town itself was full of drunken negroes and the vilest vagabond soldiers, the veriest scum of the entire army being collected in the streets." The very night of the conflagration he spoke of the efforts "to arrest the countless villains of every command that were roaming over the streets."

General Logan, commander of the fifteenth corps, said, in his report of March 31: "The citizens had so crazed our men with liquor that it was almost impossible to control them. The scenes in Columbia that night were terrible. Some fiend first applied the torch, and the wild flames leaped from house to house and street to street, until the lower and business part of the city was wrapped in flames. Frightened citizens rushed in every direction, and the reeling incendiaries dashed, torch in hand, from street to street, spreading dismay wherever they went."

"Some escaped prisoners," wrote General Howard, commander of the right wing. April 1, "convicts from the penitentiary just broken open, army followers, and drunken soldiers ran through house after house, and were doubtless guilty of all manner of villainies, and it is these men that I presume set new fires farther and farther to the windward in the northern part of the city. Old men, women, and children, with everything they could get, were herded together in the streets. At some places we found officers and kind-hearted soldiers protecting families from the insults and roughness of the careless. Meanwhile the flames made fearful ravages, and magnificent residences and churches were consumed in a very few minutes." All these quotations are from Federal officers who were witnesses of the scene and who wrote their accounts shortly after the event, without collusion or dictation. They wrote too before they knew that the question, Who burned Columbia? would be an irritating one in the after years. These accounts are therefore the best of evidence. It is not necessary to exclude one by an-

other. All may be believed, leading us to the result that all the classes named had a hand in the sack and destruction of Columbia.

When the fire was well under way, Sherman appeared on the scene, but gave no orders. Nor was it necessary, for Generals Howard, Logan, Woods, and others were laboring earnestly to prevent the spread of the conflagration. By their efforts and by the change and subsidence of wind, the fire in the early morning of February 18 was stayed. Columbia, wrote General Howard, was little "except a blackened surface peopled with numerous chimneys and an occasional house that had been spared as if by a miracle." Science, history, and art might mourn at the loss they sustained in the destruction of the house of Dr. Gibbes, an antiquarian and naturalist, a scientific acquaintance, if not a friend, of Agassiz. His large library, portfolios of fine engravings, two hundred paintings, a remarkable cabinet of southern fossils, a collection of sharks' teeth, "pronounced by Agassiz to be the finest in the world," relics of our aborigines and others from Mexico, "his collection of historical documents, original correspondence of the Revolution, especially that of South Carolina," were all burned.

The story of quelling the disorder is told by General Oliver: "February 18, at 4 A. M., the Third Brigade was called out to suppress riot; did so, killing 2 men, wounding 30 and arresting 370." It is worthy of note that, despite the reign of lawlessness during the night, very few, if any, outrages were committed on women.

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